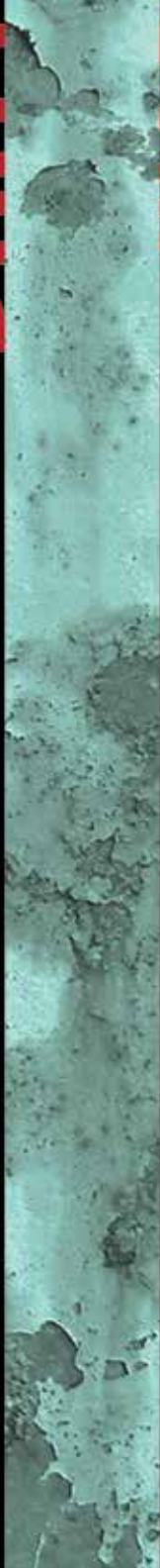


**THE**



**DIRTY**



**WAR**



**charles c. smith**

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# **THE DIRTY WAR**

The making of the myth of  
Black dangerousness

**CHARLES C. SMITH**

The eighth in the  
*Our Schools/Our Selves* book series  
2014





The Dirty War: The making of the myth of Black dangerousness  
2014

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The eighth in the *Our Schools/Our Selves* book series.

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To Meera Sethi, this is your third cover with my work. What a privilege to connect with you again.

And lastly, to Bia Rohde, whose editing and conversations with me have enabled me to write this book. Bia's unflagging support, sharp eye, critical insight and questioning attitude have helped me immeasurably in putting these pages together. Without her, I know this book would

not be.

Before signing off, a word about language. Throughout this book, I've used various terms to discuss persons of African descent who live in North America and the UK. Some of this is attributable to quotations. However, a more critical perspective is related to choice in using the terms African American, African Canadian, African descent or diasporic, Blacks, Black people, Black peoples. All of these terms are in contemporary use and seem contingent, leaving one to wonder about the source and its derivatives or, more interestingly, what each means on its own and, having defined that, where there may be intersections.

I have chosen to use the term "Black peoples" as I see the experience of Blackness partly, and originally, as a contrast with Whiteness; however, as not all Whiteness is the same and offers difference based on nationality, language, religion and those things that comprise local cultures, so too Blackness. In this context, there is both a unity and a difference between Blacks in different countries, especially since local circumstances lend much to the determination of how Blackness is seen and experienced, and how it is nuanced.

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## PREFACE

As I was preparing to write this preface, I came across two very interesting, and intersecting, perspectives — an article in *The Guardian* and a quote by Aldous Huxley. Wilkerson’s article “Mike Brown’s shooting and Jim Crow lynchings have too much in common” is a stark reminder of how the legacies of lynching are manifest in contemporary racialized violence against Black bodies and how legally sanctioned police violence against young Black men can still rely on the racial construction of fear, in this case of Black criminality, as part of the mainstream culture today.<sup>1</sup>

At the same, Huxley’s words that I cite at the end of this introduction appear to be strikingly relevant to Canadian contemporary politics and in particular to the subject of this book. He asserts that those in power use every tool available to them, and names several (e.g., the media, democratic forms of government, including courts), to maintain control in the hands of the few and to ensure that it remains secure in that space.

The issues Wilkerson and Huxley share across time, countries, jurisdictions and social identities paint a view of power and its ubiquitous presence constraining lives through hegemonic influence and/or force. These two perspectives on state control and the importance of violence, both real and as part of collective memory, are at the heart of this short book, *The Dirty War*. They connect to the view I put forward in these pages, and the continuing discourse that I reference throughout this book, that Black peoples live in a hostile

world and that the violence of the past carried out by the mob is today carried out by the state and its institutions, e.g., child welfare, education, health services, law enforcement etc; and, further, that those in positions of influence and power initiate and enable this.

To frame this assertion, I make a link between W.E.B. DuBois' concerns about "terror" to Stuart Hall's "moral panic". In this context, I suggest that those who were once terrorized by the mob are now portrayed as a cause for moral panic and are, therefore, terrorized by the state and its institutions. Wilkerson writes

...there are parallels between the violence of the past and what happens today. Images and stereotypes built into American culture have fed prevailing assumptions of black inferiority and wantonness before the time of Jim Crow. Many of those stereotypes persist to this day and have mutated with the times. Last century's beast and savage have become this century's gangbanger and thug, embedding a pre-written script for subconscious bias that primes many to accept what they were programmed to believe about black Americans, whether they are aware of it or not.<sup>2</sup>

Implicit in her statement is the connection between representation, control and force as it visits Black peoples in the U.S. Huxley speaks from a different time about a different country and from a very different personal space than Wilkerson, yet he too sees into the depths of state influence. These are the key concepts I work out in this book. More like a novella, these pages follow this narrative through media accounts, historical and cultural studies texts, varied sources for reports, legal theory and judicial reasoning — both from the past and today. Most importantly, this book represents an effort to demonstrate the similarities Wilkerson points out for the U.S. can be related to the Canadian context, what we know and what we need to unearth.

The first chapter *Being Taken For A Ride* leans on the prevailing view of Black dangerousness and how this dangerousness is constrained. Focusing at the outset on recent news articles that address violence in Black communities either in suspicious shootings or the incursion of the police and the criminal justice system, in an effort to express urgency about this situation, this chapter begins to unfold the focus of the book and how it will be conveyed. Using reports, scholarship



and other texts, this chapter deepens the focus on Blackness and suggests a broader view of Black lives is needed to see the cumulative impact happening now and as it was intended at the start. For this, we must see these lives against other metrics essential to well-being, i.e., education, health, employment and financial stability.

Chapter Two, *The Threat of Violence* looks at the violence in which Black peoples live and how this has re-appeared in different places, at different times and in different social structures. It asks that we think about the representations of such a legacy and how it continues to affect us today. Here I start with DuBois as I noted above and make my way to Hall *et al.* The data provided pillars the notion that the only thing that has changed is the author of the violence Blacks are subjected to and that the state has had a hand in either scenario.

Chapter three, *When Systems Collude: The Lines Between Institutions and Anti-Black Racism*, opens way to considering other social institutions, i.e., child welfare and education, physical and mental health, employment and income, and their links to Black representation as code for deprivation. The review of outcomes for Black peoples in each of these settings both confirms and sets a path to the operations of state violence practiced by the police.

In each of these chapters, I use diverse voices, including my own experiences, as contributions to particular sections that illustrate how broader social circumstances impact on personal lives. These chapters call attention to what is abundantly documented in the public domain and ought to be well known given its persistence. This supports my most significant contention that if so much is known — and undoubtedly so much more since this book makes no claim to be exhaustive — why is so little being done and so little spoken of in public forum about the full extent of the challenge that exists in Canada today and continues unchanged and largely unchecked.

I return to this issue over and over as it relates to diverse sectors of society to demonstrate the excessive degree and impact of anti-Black racism — that is the purpose of this book, to show in the context of what Huxley noted the critical circumstances in which Black peoples live.

...by means of ever more effective methods of mind-manipulation, the democracies will change their nature; the quaint old forms — elections, parliaments, Supreme Courts — will remain.

The underlying substance will be a new kind of totalitarianism. All the traditional names, all the hallowed slogans will remain exactly where they were in the good old days. Democracy and freedom will be the theme of every broadcast and editorial ... Meanwhile the ruling oligarchy and its highly trained elite of soldiers, policemen, thought manufacturers and mind-manipulators will quietly run the show as they see fit.<sup>3</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

1 Wilkerson, Isabel "Mike Brown's shooting and Jim Crow lynchings have too much in common. It's time for America to own up", *The Guardian*, Monday August 25, 2014. See also Markovitz, Jonathan *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*, University of Minnesota Press, 2004; and Rangus, Eric *Conference Explores Legacy of Lynching*, *Emory Report*, September 23, 2002 [http://www.emory.edu/EMORY\\_REPORT/erarchive/2002/September/erSept.23/9\\_23\\_02conference.html](http://www.emory.edu/EMORY_REPORT/erarchive/2002/September/erSept.23/9_23_02conference.html).

2 Ibid Wilkerson.

3 *Brave New World Revisited*, Harper Collins (reprint edition 2003) 1958. Quite interestingly, there is a recent release on American politics that suggests very much the same. See *Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens*, Martin Gilens, Princeton University and Benjamin I. Page Northwestern University. Forthcoming fall 2014 in *Perspectives on Politics*. The abstract to their paper asserts "Multivariate analysis indicates that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence. The results provide substantial support for theories of Economic Elite Domination and for theories of Biased Pluralism, but not for theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy or Majoritarian Pluralism."



### **About the author**

Charles C. Smith is a published poet, playwright and essayist. His play, *Last Days for the Desperate*, won second prize from Black Theatre Canada. He has edited three collections of poetry, has two published books of poetry — *Partial Lives* (Williams Wallace Press), and *travelogue of the bereaved* (TSAR Publications) — and his work has appeared in numerous journals and magazines including: *Poetry Canada Review*, *the Quille and Quire*, *Descant*, *Dandelion*, *the Amethyst Review*, *Bywords*, and *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. He recently received a grant from the Ontario Arts Council's Writers Reserve Grants Program and the Toronto Arts Council Writers Program, and is currently working on multidisciplinary performance pieces based on his poetry and produced by the 'wind in the leaves collective'. Charles is the Cultural Liaison in the Dean's Office at the University of Toronto Scarborough where he also lectures in the Historical and Cultural Studies Department and the English Department. He is the Project Lead for Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario and a Research Associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives where he has published four books (two edited) ranging in subjects from racial profiling to anti-racism in education and pluralism in the arts. "The Dirty War" is his most recent book with the CCPA.